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OPINION

Times-Union Editorial: A small town's grim story

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Hoosick Falls residents worry their drinking water is deadly.

Will village officials look beyond their concerns about image?

What's happening in Hoosick Falls has all the makings of a movie: Concerned citizens, alarmed by a rash of unusual cancers among family and friends, start digging and find a possible link to industrial pollution. Clueless officials worried about image throw up obstacles to the search for truth.

If only this was just a movie. This is real life, with potentially grave consequences for real human beings.

If there's a hero in this story, it's Michael Hickey, whose father was among those who seemed to die too young, and of uncommon cancers, in this village of 3,500 people. His search led him to the Saint-Gobain Performance Plastics plant at which his father had worked and which lies not far from a well that feeds the village's water treatment plant, and to a chemical once used there, perfluorooctanoic acid, or PFOA. It has been linked to various health problems including kidney and testicular cancer, and thyroid diseases. Manufacturers stopped making or using it a decade ago.

Thanks to Mr. Hickey, who kept collecting samples, and a grass-roots group, Healthy Hoosick Water, which pressured the village and Saint-Gobain to do more tests, residents do know more: that PFOA contamination ranges from 540 parts per trillion or more coming out of taps to 18,000 ppt in groundwater under the Saint-Gobain plant. The federal guideline is 400 ppt.

Yet even with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency urging the village to stop using tap water for drinking and cooking until the treatment plant consistently produces safe water, village leaders seem unenthused. The EPA had to tell Mayor Borge to clean up misleading information on the village website.

Saint-Gobain has been providing bottled water to residents, and has pledged to install a \$2 million carbon filter at the treatment plant that would remove an estimated 80 percent of the PFOA. That project, though, could take a year.

The village must do more. It should give residents clearer guidance on the risks. It should identify and test private wells, waterways, and fish. It should use temporary filters at the treatment plant.

The state has a job here, too — it needs to revisit standards that don't even require testing for PFOA and allow up to 50,000 ppt. And it needs to help the village plan long-term monitoring.

How this will turn out, we don't yet know. But if nothing else, Mayor Borge and the village board might consider how they'd likely be portrayed in a movie about Hoosick Falls. So far, it's a fair bet they won't look like one of the good guys.